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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 003251

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: MUCH DISCUSSION OF POSSIBLE CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE
AS HOUSE MULLS OVER IMPEACHMENT OPTIONS

REF: A. MANILA 3231

- [B](#). MANILA 3200
- [C](#). MANILA 3187
- [D](#). MANILA 3093
- [E](#). MANILA 3046

Classified By: Political Officer Andrew McClearn for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A group of party leaders from across the political spectrum (pro-President Arroyo to opposition) met July 12 and agreed that the Philippine Constitution should be changed to create a unicameral legislature. No firm work program was agreed to. Arroyo welcomed further discussions in this area. House leaders continue to discuss the nature of an impeachment motion against arroyo and the modalities of moving it forward for discussion once sessions recommence on July 25. Archbishop Rosales of Manila told Acting Pol/C July 14 that he believed that the recent Catholic Bishops' statement had helped calm the political waters, but he noted that the statement could be re-visited if tensions ramped up. The discussion of constitutional change (a.k.a., "Charter Change" or "Cha-Cha") is a long-standing favorite sport of Manila's chattering classes, although there seems to be growing interest in the notion that movement in this area potentially could be a constructive way out of the ongoing controversy. End Summary.

A Call for Constitutional Change

[1](#)2. (SBU) A group of party leaders from across the political spectrum (pro-President Arroyo to opposition) met July 12 and agreed that the Philippine Constitution should be changed to create a unicameral legislature. The forum was convened by House Speaker Joseph de Venecia as the second political party summit meeting in the last few months meant to encourage reconciliation and cross-party solutions to the country's problems. Leading representatives from all major national political parties -- LAKAS, KAMPI, Liberal Party, Nacionalista Party, National People's Coalition (NPC), Laban Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP), PDP-Laban, and leftist "party-list" groups led by Bayan Muna -- agreed that the country's political problems were "systemic" and that the checks and balances built into the current form of government "simply do not work." In their joint statement, the group endorsed the notion of revising the form of government from "the presidential to the parliamentary federal system." The group also endorsed a "complete overhaul of the Commission on Elections" in order to reestablish credibility and integrity in the electoral system. No firm work program was agreed to. Speaker De Venecia promised that Congress would address the issue immediately when it reopens sessions on July 25.

[1](#)3. (U) President Arroyo publicly welcomed the joint statement. She said she supported constitutional changes and would move the matter forward as a high priority item. The President said she was grateful to De Venecia for bringing the parties together. Arroyo claimed the joint statement would help her "listen closely to the pulse of the people" and decide how "to consolidate support among both allies and opponents of her administration in order to know what is good and right for the Filipino people."

[1](#)4. (C) The discussion on constitutional change comes amid growing interest in the topic. On July 7, former president Fidel Ramos publicly called for constitutional modifications by early next year to eliminate the executive presidency followed by May 2006 elections to elect a new parliament. He repeated this plan in a meeting with Charge. De Venecia has long supported a shift to a unicameral parliamentary legislative form of government, noting to Charge in a July 6 lunch meeting that President Arroyo had already agreed to underscore the need for constitutional change in her annual State of the Nation address (SONA) scheduled for July 25 (ref D).

House Mulls Over Impeachment Options

15. (U) House leaders continue to discuss the nature of an impeachment motion and the modalities of moving it forward for discussion once sessions recommence on July 25. After the July 8 call for Arroyo to resign by most members of the Liberal Party -- formerly a key member of Arroyo's congressional coalition -- opposition lawmakers said they would redouble efforts to strengthen the complaint before it is formally submitted to the House Committee on Justice (ref E). Opposition Representative Ronaldo Zamora declared in an interview July 12 that he was consulting with Attorney Oliver Lozano, who filed the original complaint, and that the opposition would "work out all the requirements of a substantial impeachment complaint" that would improve the motion's chances of gaining support in the lower house. Observers have suggested that anywhere from 50 to 75 House members now support the move to impeach Arroyo, still shy of the 79 members necessary to refer the motion successfully to the Senate (where two-thirds support is needed to convict on impeachment grounds). Several pro-opposition representatives have told us recently that they believed the opposition now was inching closer to the requisite support needed to make a referral to the Senate.

16. (U) In the meantime, a House joint hearing into the taped conversations of possible 2004 electoral fraud continued, although subpoenas to several key witnesses went unanswered. Senate hearings also continued into allegations that some members of the President's family were involved in "jueteng" (illegal gambling) profiteering. Opposition members have also told us that Catholic Archbishop Oscar Cruz, an anti-jueteng crusader, had more witnesses who would appear and testify against Arroyo.

"We are not Politicians"

17. (C) In a July 14 meeting with Acting Pol/C, Archbishop Gaudencio Rosales of Manila, an influential Catholic prelate, said he believed that the Catholic Bishops' statement issued on July 10 had helped calm the political waters (ref C). While bishops had debated long and hard about the precise wording of the statement, he commented that there had never been much doubt that they would decline to demand that President Arroyo resign from office: "We are not politicians," he said. Rosales noted that the bishops had not absolved Arroyo and that she must be accountable for her actions. On the other hand, the opposition's program of rallies was "disruptive to a country that is already poor." He pointedly noted that the July 10 statement could be re-visited if political tensions ramped up further. Rosales denied reports that he and former president Corazon Aquino had worked together in recent weeks in an effort to convince Arroyo to leave office. Rosales said he was close to Aquino, but did not support her stance that Arroyo must resign. Acting Pol/C reviewed key USG points, stressing that we supported the rule of law, and strongly opposed any extra-constitutional or extra-legal steps. Rosales remarked that he supported these points, too, and strongly appreciated the USG's role during the ongoing controversy, observing that Charge's public statements had had a "calming effect" and were "very constructive."

Comment

18. (C) The discussion of constitutional change (a.k.a., "Charter Change" or "Cha-Cha") is a long-standing favorite sport of Manila's chattering classes, which has never gone anywhere. There seems to be growing interest in the notion that movement in this area potentially could be a constructive way out of the ongoing controversy. Arroyo -- who has previously paid lip service to the matter -- appears to be latching on to proposals in this area. (Note: In a July 12 meeting, Arroyo told Charge that she would support constitutional change even if it meant shortening her term -- see ref A. End Note.) In large part, Arroyo is being forced to reconsider options in this area due to her political vulnerabilities -- at this point, she is in no position to ignore key allies Ramos and De Venecia, and their calls for such change. Re impeachment, most observers believe that this matter will take time to work through the House and, if there is the requisite support there, move on to the Senate. As noted, the opposition appears confident that it is gaining support for impeaching Arroyo.

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